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ABSTRACT

The permanent order of deacon is proposed in the United Methodist Church. The following are suggestions for governing representative ministry so it can be structured to enliven and renew the life of United Methodism: (1) any view of diaconal and other representative ministries must be seen in relation to the general ministry of all Christians; (2) the calling of diaconal ministries (deacons) is essentially an enabling ministry for the larger body of Christians; (3) the order of deacon is an appropriate designation for the twentieth century; (4) ordination is historically a more accurate word to designate ministers who are set apart for service than is the word consecration; (5) annual conference membership for permanent deacons, without a guaranteed appointment and apart from the itinerancy, is not as radical a departure from the present situation as it may initially seem to be; (6) for permanent deacons to be ordained and admitted to annual conference membership, educational requirements should be equivalent to those for ordination as elder; (7) ordination and conference membership for permanent deacons should be based on the same conditions in other areas as those which prevail for the eldership, including the intention of engaging in the full-time diaconate on a permanent basis. It is argued that ordination as a permanent deacon and admission to the annual conference are to be taken fully as seriously and to be handled with as much care as ordination to the order of elder. The provision for this process is in the 1980 Book of Discipline. (CC)

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Occasional PAPERS

No. 36, June 1, 1981

SOME NOTES ON A PERMANENT DIACONATE IN THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

by Howard Grimes

Editor's Note: The 1980 General Conference ordered the Board of Higher Education and Ministry to prepare legislation on diaconal ministry that would resolve some of the questions that have persisted about the diaconal movement. Ordination, conference membership, itineracy, and other issues are to be addressed by the Ministry Study Committee chaired by Dean Dale Dunlap of Saint Paul School of Theology, Kansas City. It is clear to members of the committee that there are no easy solutions to some of the problems posed in the study. We are faced with a growing professional movement of women and men who are active in ministry and increasingly self-conscious of their professionalism. Theological and equity questions must be faced.

All Christian churches are experiencing a renewed interest in the permanent diaconate. The needs for professional ministry have become more apparent and urgent. In Roman Catholicism, the lack of priests has encouraged the development of a diaconate of "liturgy and service." Lutherans have developed a concept of ordained and "commissioned" ministers. The special details of a denominational tradition influence the shapes of the diaconal movement, but the movement itself is growing. The board encourages wide discussion of this movement and its place and role in the ministry of the church. Occasional Papers will be a forum for presentation and debate on this issue in the months ahead. Readers may want to note that Gerald F. Moede's essay "A Renewed Diaconate in the United Methodist Church?" (Occasional Paper number 22) is still available for study.

Howard Grimes has served as a member of the Division of Diaconal Ministry of BHEM. Professor of Christian education at Perkins School of Theology at Southern Methodist University, he retired this year but will teach next year at Perkins. This essay represents his continuing contribution to the discussion on the diaconal ministry.

F. Thomas Trotter

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The latest form of the permanent diaconate in the United Methodist Church requires adjustment in our thinking. During the past few years I have been involved in the process both of rethinking what representative ministry means and how it can be structured so as to enliven and perhaps renew the life of United Methodism. The following seven propositions represent the conclusion to which I have come during this process of rethinking.

1. Any view of diaconal and other representative ministries must be seen in relation to the general ministry of all Christians. The general ministry of all Christians is conferred by baptism into the "People of God" (ho laos tou Theou). Calling is related to gifts, according to Romans 12:4-8 and 1 Corinthians 12:4-11. Ephesians 4:11-12 apparently represents a transition to a representative ministry, where apostles, prophets, evangelists, and pastor-teachers exist "for the equipment of the saints (Christians) for the work of ministry...." The deacons of Acts 6:1-6 were selected for the special ministry of "waiting on tables," but functions were flexible and one of the deacons, Stephen, soon assumed another role, that of preacher/teacher (Acts 6:8-15). Only in 1 Timothy 3:1-10 are "orders" of ministry clearly stated, that of bishops and deacons.

How the understanding of all Christians as ministers was gradually eroded and how it has been revived at various times in the history of the church are not the subject of this brief paper. Suffice it to say that the United Methodist Church now affirms the general ministry of all Christians (see pars. 301, 401, 1980 Book of Discipline). The representative ministry--elder and diaconal--is understood as being called out of the general ministry for special functions (pars. 302, 402).

2. The calling of diaconal ministries (deacons) is essentially to an enabling ministry for the larger body of Christians (par. 301). The Greek word from which "deacon" and related words are derived means "service" or "servant." In Acts service was first related to the meeting of physical needs. Later, the act of enabling was as assistant to the priest. In the Reformed tradition (John Calvin), deacons were given the responsibility for caring for the sick and administering alms. Often deacons have been understood as inferior to other ministers, but such apparently was not the original intention. A contemporary writer, J. G. Davies, after considering different forms of the diaconate in the past, writes: "The diaconate therefore is or should be a ministry with a character of its own and should not be regarded, as is often so, as an auxiliary function of a ministry that is set over it" (A Dictionary of Christian Theology, ed. Alan Richardson (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1969) p. 87). The 1980 Book of Discipline recognizes this special character as being "to help the whole of the membership of the Church be engaged in and fulfill its ministry of service" (par. 301).

3. The order of deacon is an appropriate designation for a the twentieth century. For want of a better descriptive word for this ministry, professional may be used. That is, persons with specific gifts (rather than the general gifts considered normative for elders) have come to exercise those gifts in full-time ministries in the church.

The two earliest to emerge were education and music. Both have grown rapidly during past decades. There are now in United Methodism 1,066 persons certified in education, 325 of whom are also ordained elder, and 583 certified in music, 86 of whom are ordained elder. There are also persons certified in such areas as evangelism, business management, communications, community workers, and other fields.

Those engaged in such full-time ministries cannot in any sense be considered as part of the general ministry, in the way in which all baptized Christains are. These specialized ministers have been called out of the general ministry for special, representative ministries. The service they do is not identical with that which in other periods of the church has been recognized as the basis for the diaconate, but it is a logical extension of such kinds of service. While church musicians may also be performers, their chief ministry is the enabling of the congregation as a whole and choirs in particular to engage in and lead in worship. Educators may (and ought to) do teaching, which itself is a kind of "performance" ministry, but their chief call is to enable a congregation, especially through its selected teachers, to be engaged more intentionally in learning. That is, the calling of these and other new ministries is to various kinds of service.

Not all of these specialized ministers are qualified for the diaconate. Some do not meet educational standards and will not wish to do so. Others are not engaged in full-time professional ministry. Diaconal ministry is not for the band director who directs a choir, or for the retired teacher who has become a part-time director of children's ministries. There are others who do meet educational qualifications or are willing to do so, and whose intention is to engage in full-time ministry in the church as a representative minister. The order of deacon is an appropriate designation both historically and theologically for those whose intention is to engage in a permanent ministry of love, service, and justice in the church and in the world.

4. *Ordination* is historically a more accurate word to designate ministers who are set apart for service than is the word *consecration*. Not all communions use the word consecration for the setting apart of bishops, but United Methodism does. The traditional word for making both deacons and elders is ordination. In United Methodism, deacons and elders are presently ordained in a two-step process, while bishops are consecrated to an office.

The diaconate, or the permanent deacon, must be recognized as an order for ordination to be properly used. It has been so recognized historically, and there is no logical reason why United Methodism cannot have both permanent deacons and deacons who are on the way to ordination as an elder.

5. Annual conference membership for permanent deacons, without a guaranteed appointment and apart from the itinerancy, is not as radical a departure from the present situation as it may initially seem to be. Originally there was no membership in the conference apart from participation in the itinerant ("traveling") pastorate. In the days of John Wesley's "religious societies," preachers who were conference members

had to be available for appointment anywhere Mr. Wesley decided they should go. Those who could not do so continued as "local preachers," often serving as pastors but with no guarantee of an appointment. Ordination was not required for conference membership, and the only thing that the nonordained could not do that the ordained did was the administering of the sacraments.

An itinerant ministry in the early days of the Methodist movement was a way of being sure that pastoral oversight was available for all societies. There were other reasons for it also. For example, an original letter in Bridwell Library of Southern Methodist University was written by John Wesley to Christopher Hopper. Wesley advises Hopper that he is to move to Dundee, Scotland, as soon as possible because James Kershaw, the present pastor, has become too popular among the people of Dundee!

When American Methodism became a church in 1784, ordination and conference membership became two tracks in the system of providing credentials for Methodist preachers. Ordination provided the mandate for Word, sacrament, and order; annual conference membership was initiation into the guild of preachers in a particular location. The conference was the association that provided support, financial and otherwise, for the ordained.

During the past fifty years, major changes have occurred in the character of the itinerancy. Congregations now have a much greater say in who their pastor will be, and pastors are consulted concerning where they will be sent. Also, a new form of ministry has arisen, formerly called "special appointment" and now designated as "extension ministry." Those in such appointments normally secure their own position or are offered it by an extraparish situation. These appointments include seminary and college teaching, the armed forces and hospital chaplaincy, interdenominational positions, and work in United Methodist boards and agencies, and even non-church-related ministries.

Although ministers in all of these extension ministries are subject to the authority of the bishop, including his or her appointing function, this authority has increasingly not been exercised. For all practical purposes they are not members of the itinerancy, and, in fact, they may create problems for the bishop and the cabinet when they exercise their conference right of a guaranteed appointment. A 1980 provision that makes the Division of Chaplains and Related Ministries responsible for providing general oversight for chaplains "under endorsement" is another small, but real, step toward changing the character of a once impregnable itinerant ministry (Book of Discipline, par. 1610.2d).

Permanent deacons as conference members who negotiate their appointments with the approval of the bishop and the cabinet (par. 310) would be in a situation not greatly unlike that of these extension ministries--with one exception: they would not be guaranteed an appointment as elders in extension ministry are. We already have, in fact, several forms of conference membership to which another would be added: itinerant members, extension ministry members, probationary members (who may be associate members or deacons), and now we would have diaconal members.

This new kind of membership would not add a large number to annual conference rolls. At present the single largest number of diaconal ministers is in the bounds of the Florida Conference--42; the second largest number is 40, in New Mexico; and the third, in North Texas with 37. Most of these came into diaconal ministry under the provision that lay workers could transfer to the diaconate. Under this provision, some of these persons did not have the educational qualifications now in place for diaconal ministers. In 1980 the largest number of newly consecrated diaconal ministers was in the North Carolina Conference, with 5; only one other conference, the Northwest Texas, had as many as 4. Those conferences with the largest number already consecrated received only one or two: Florida, 2; New Mexico, 1; and North Texas, 1. In other words, there appears to be no danger that permanent deacons will overrun the annual conferences. One important deterring factor is that most pastoral charges cannot afford a second full-time staff member.

6. For permanent deacons to be ordained and admitted to annual conference membership, educational requirements should be equivalent to those for ordination as elder. This is true for several reasons: the basic reason is that there should be a common educational standard for conference membership--either a theological school education or alternate studies. Such equivalency is also necessary for equality of ministerial performance between the two kinds of representative ministers (not, of course, that education assures ministerial competency!). It likewise provides the basis on which mutual respect between elders and permanent deacons can be built.

But what does "equivalency" mean? Educational requirements need not be identical: elders require a broad-based education not only in the biblical, historical, theological, and ethical fields but also in regard to the various ministerial functions associated with pastoral ministry. Deacons should have a comparable base in the biblical, historical, theological, and ethical fields but require ministerial competency primarily in their specialized field. For example, deacons in the educational ministry do not preach, administer the sacraments, or lead congregational worship. Therefore it may well be that the two-year Master of Religious Education degree can be considered equivalent to the Master of Divinity degree. This is not to say that there are not problems related to equivalency: for example, technical preparation for music ministry is so extensive that full equivalency in general theological education is difficult to achieve. For all deacons, however, equivalency both in degree work and in alternate studies will need to be determined.

7. Ordination and conference membership for permanent deacons should be based on the same conditions in other areas as those which prevail for the eldership, including the intention of engaging in the full-time diaconate on a permanent basis. Many of the conditions set forth in pars. 303-6 of the 1980 Book of Discipline are equivalent to those for the deacon-elder ordination (pars. 403-7, 413-8, 422-7). Insofar as they are not equivalent, they would need to be changed.

The intention of engaging in full-time diaconal ministry on a permanent basis is listed separately because professional ministry has not always involved this condition. This is as it should be, for the church needs persons who provide specialized service both temporarily and permanently.

The diaconate requires a different level of intentionality, however: full-time work on a permanent basis.

Intention of permanency does not, of course, mean that one is locked into either elder or diaconal ministry. I once knew a person who was ordained elder, admitted into full connection, and "located" at a single session of an annual conference. I have known over the years many seminary graduates who, for various reasons, did not remain in the itinerant ministry, or did not keep their orders. What intentional permanency does mean is that at the time of ordination and admission into the conference the person thinks of him/herself as being in representative ministry for an indefinite period--for life or some major part of it.

What must be made clear to candidates for the permanent diaconate and to the church at large is that ordination as a permanent deacon and admission to the annual conference is to be taken fully as seriously and to be handled with as much care as ordination to the order of elder. The provision for this process is in place in the 1980 Book of Discipline, and conference boards of diaconal ministry must assess the personal, spiritual, educational, and church qualifications of candidates for the permanent diaconate as carefully as most conference boards of ordained ministry now do for elders. Indeed, it would seem that at some time in the future these two boards should be merged with the title of conference board of ordained ministry, or conference board of representative ministry. Both of these titles will militate against the common tendency of identifying ministry with ordination. The clear statements concerning general ministry already in the 1980 Book of Discipline must be preserved through the distinction between general and representative ministry.

On the basis of these seven propositions, with the conditions stated herein and with other conditions already in the 1980 Book of Discipline or to be included therein, I can see no logical or theological reason for not having a permanent order of deacon, ordained to love, service and justice, with full membership in the annual conference. Moreover, the weight of positive evidence indicates that we have reached the time in the United Methodist Church when such a step is both in keeping with the tradition of the church in general and with the United Methodist Church in particular, and necessary for the well-being of the Body of Christ.